

Workplace safety: Making it human

Unlock your employees' commitment to safety with simple, personalized, behavior-based strategies



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Introduction

Our approach to safety is powerful and human-centered, connecting safety to personal values and embedding it into organizational DNA. This approach helps transform safety culture from being reactive and rule-based to proactive and behavior-based, ensuring safety is everyone's responsibility.

We know that many businesses are working diligently to try to improve their safety metrics, but they still aren't seeing the improvements they want to see. If this is you, you're not alone. We work with safety experts at the top of their field who still find it challenging to see marked changes in safety at their businesses. Why is that?

The truth is, from our extensive client work, we've seen many businesses overcomplicate safety. We believe there are simple steps all companies can take to drastically improve safety culture for the long term.

Everyone deserves to feel safe at work, but despite proactive and enthusiastic efforts, incidents are still on the rise.

Our methodology focuses on making human connections to safety. We emphasize making it a strategic priority, creating personal experiences and embedding a consistent approach in real-life situations.



Why safety matters

Everyone needs to be safe at work, but people also need to *feel* safe.

Workplace-related deaths exceed the average annual deaths from road accidents combined (999,000), war (502,000), violence (563,000) and HIV/AIDS (312,000).

Workplace safety incidents arise when employees feel unsupported in their role, psychologically unsafe or unable to speak up. With 92% of workers saying it's important for an organization to value their emotional and psychological well-being, it's clear that safety in all forms contributes to the overall culture.

As described by LeaderFactor, "physical safety and psychological safety are interconnected aspects of workplace well-being, and addressing both is essential for creating a comprehensive approach to employee health and satisfaction." Psychological safety underpins all of our client work—from leadership training to safety solutions—and it's often the missing ingredient that businesses need support with.

As noted by McKinsey & Company, "In extensive research ranging from medical teams in hospitals to software development teams at Big Tech firms, psychological safety is consistently one of the strongest predictors of team performance, productivity, quality, safety, creativity and innovation." Yet, "psychological safety is not a given and it is not the norm in most teams."



A truly safe workplace is one where people feel confident, safe and supported to speak up, question the status quo and flag hazardous behaviors.

Safety campaigns can't exist in a vacuum. Before addressing safety concerns, it's important to address any broader culture issues first.

Amid the daily pressures of business, company safety strategies can become reactive. Issues are addressed only when they occur, shifting focus with each new incident. This creates a cycle where employees chase improvements in safety metrics, frustrated by a lack of progress because they still need to address underlying causes.

When we approach safety projects with our clients, we never see it as a checkbox exercise. Instead, we're looking to provide a solution that develops and matures company safety culture. As The Checker describes, "by a 'safety culture,' we mean that everyone—management at all levels, front-line employees, contractors you regularly use, etc.—not only understands the personal and business imperative to be safe at work but has internalized that appreciation in such a way that it positively affects their safety behavior."

As EHS Insights notes, "Companies with strong safety cultures aren't reactive because they don't need to be." That's because for these companies, safety is a number one priority by leadership.

Instead of a reactive safety culture, we advocate for—and prove the value of—a Behavior-Based Safety culture (BBS). As defined by Safety Mint, "Behavior-Based Safety or BBS is a scientific approach to positively reinforce a safe work environment by modulating unsafe behavioral patterns. A BBS system focuses on how people work, analyzes why they work in a certain way and applies an intervention strategy to eliminate unsafe behavior."

A BBS approach doesn't mean throwing out the rule book. As EHS Insights continues, "metrics do play an important role in your safety culture—they tell you what you need to improve. But, if you want to see those metrics improve you have to look past them. Look at the root causes and see how you, as a manager, can help eliminate problems before they arise."



In safety cultures, safety is always top of mind, and the thought of taking safety shortcuts is readily dismissed because it would violate the culture norms of the organization. That's what companies with genuine safety cultures have achieved—being unsafe is uncool in their organizations.

What it means to be safe

What does it mean to feel genuinely safe at work?

When we think about workplace safety, our minds typically focus on physical safety—preventing harm to our bodies while performing daily tasks. However, true safety encompasses both physical and psychological aspects. In fact, physical safety can't exist without psychological safety.

What do we mean by psychological safety?

A psychologically safe workplace is an environment where employees feel free to express ideas, share concerns and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences. Psychologically safe working environments foster open communication and trust.

An unsafe working environment is one in which workers feel they can't report issues out of fear of punishment or dismissal. It's equally problematic when employees feel they can't challenge the status quo. Workers on the front line, who are most exposed to safety risks, need to feel they can speak up, communicate safety concerns and ask questions. They need to know that they will be heard and have their concerns addressed by leadership rather than dismissed.

Without psychological safety, communication will break down, leading to accumulating risk as issues go unreported.

Why do we advocate for behavior-based safety models?

It's not enough to implement measures as issues arise. Workplaces with excellent safety metrics have safe practices built into their cultural fabric and behavioral frameworks. These practices address the root causes of injury, hazards and incidents rather than dealing with them afterwards.

What is workplace safety?

More than avoiding accidents by following the rules, building a safe workplace means developing an environment of care and connection, where everyone takes ownership of keeping each other safe and celebrates healthy high performance.



Making it a priority

How can you practically bring about a cultural shift where safety is the top priority in employees' daily lives? When we work with clients, we always recommend that leaders pledge to follow four simple safety rules. We know that if organizations follow these simple rules, their culture will start to change over time.

TAKE THE LEAD: If you're reading this, you likely understand the importance of making safety the top priority in your business. As a leader, you can be the catalyst for change.



1. Change mindsets

For change to occur, people must understand how their emotions impact their safety and the safety of others.

This step is crucial as it uncovers existing barriers and ensures leaders have the skills needed to support their teams in being open with each other and adopting a safety-first mindset.

Although it can be challenging to step back and analyze the professional skills gaps and emotional intelligence dynamics within teams, it's essential.

When we work with clients in this area, we focus on human factors and operationalize cognitive behavioral theory into simple, practical tools. These tools help employees recognize their mental state and become more present in the moment. We guide leaders in opening up conversations about emotional intelligence, normalizing reflection and recognizing how each individual's emotional state can impact overall team dynamics. By creating an environment where discussing emotional intelligence is encouraged, we improve personal understanding and self-management. This leads to a more conscious and aware workforce.

Real change begins once teams understand appropriate behavior—how they should act and how they should not—and can communicate that openly with their peers. Building an open, trusting, psychologically safe environment is a mature foundation where a stronger culture focused on safety can emerge.

Individuals with high emotional intelligence are better able to perceive and assess risks accurately. They can recognize potential hazards and understand the consequences of their actions, which helps in preventing accidents and injuries. Additionally, effective communication is essential for safety protocols to be understood and followed. Emotional intelligence enables individuals to express safety concerns clearly and assertively, as well as to actively listen to others' concerns. This fosters an environment where safety-related information can be shared openly and acted upon promptly.

—NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL OF THE U.S.



2. Own it

This step is about getting people to take accountability for their actions, seeking to improve their behavior for themselves and others.

This means understanding and taking responsibility for the fundamentals—wearing the correct PPE, raising the alarm, reporting correctly and adhering to processes. Everyone is alert, vigilant and looks out for each other.

Whether it's diet, exercise or any new regime, we can all be inspired to make a change, but making it a habit is the trickiest part. The key is getting people to be willing to be part of the change.

Further than that, you need to have daily reminders, resources and routines that promote habit forming week in, week out. From daily communication, manager's toolkits and real-time feedback conversations, safety needs to be woven into daily practice and interactions.

Your goal is to rid the social system of censure, ridicule and disregard toward those who speak up. This may require individual and team training to build up skills. [...] Start by over-indexing on appreciation. Speaking up is an act of generosity. It involves an employee doing something that feels potentially harmful to them individually but benefits the collective. So, thank them—publicly, privately often, and with sincerity.

—THE HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

3. Speak up

In companies with a strong safety environment, giving and receiving feedback is a regular and valued practice.

Employees need to feel comfortable telling others when they are unsafe or acting unsafely. When feedback is structured and regular, it becomes a normal part of daily working life, reducing defensiveness and fear, and making it easier for colleagues to accept and act on safety-related suggestions.

When working with clients on safety projects, we often discuss cultivating an environment where employees are encouraged to “speak up.” We mean companies that develop a culture where employees aren't afraid to give and receive feedback. In this culture, risks are regularly identified and addressed among peers, and people take the feedback on board because they know what is expected of them.

In our campaign, 1Life, with our retail supply chain client based in Australia and New Zealand, we built six simple and relatable “lifelines” for leaders to refer to consistently during reviews and catch-ups with their colleagues. One of the lifelines, “see it, say it, stop it,” provided a structured outlet for employees to raise concerns and be recognized and rewarded for speaking up.

4. Just ask

As leaders, create a space where employees feel safe asking questions and sharing their learnings. The aim is to create an environment where employees can be curious, open and unafraid to ask any question, big or small.

Coaching can be a valuable tool here. Applied coaching skills ask open-ended questions and, in turn, invite people to question and give feedback. It encourages employees' open dialogue and to seek help and problem solve.



In conversation with Rod Maule

We've been lucky enough to work with and learn from safety experts at the very top of their field, like Rod Maule, Former General Manager of Safety and Well-Being at Australia Post. When we began working with Rod, we had just delivered a company-wide project, Our AP Way, which set the stage for large-scale change underpinned by a move from letter to parcel delivery.

In the safety campaign, Be a Friend, that followed, we worked with Rod to embed a long-term behavior-based safety culture at Australia Post. We met with him to discuss his experience and how we worked to prioritize safety at the postal company.

Sometimes the challenge is that people come up with things that are just too theoretical, a good idea, but will never work in practice without money, time and capacity.

Where do companies often go wrong when it comes to safety culture?

"The biggest challenge with safety culture is finding things that are going to resonate with your workforce, and every workforce is a little bit different. I don't think you can 'cookie cutter' an approach, which is one of the mistakes people make. You need to gain an understanding of what resonates with your people.

"The discovery work is really important to build credibility. If you look at the work [your team has] done, whether it was the Our AP Way work, or the recent work on safety, the discovery was really important to build credibility with the workforce and management. Finding what it is that makes people say, 'That makes sense, that resonates with me. I'll support it.'

"It's also important that there is general recognition that cultural change takes time. This is not, we roll it out, and six months later we're going to see this miraculous change, because that's not how cultural change works."



Rod Maule

Former General Manager,
Safety and Well-Being,
Australia Post

I think the key for any safety program, be it cultural change or risk control, is that it's got to be practical.

When we started working with Australia Post, great efforts had been made when it came to safety, but nothing had really stuck. We asked Rod, what was your safety journey like at Australia Post?

"When I arrived at Australia Post, they'd done some great work in the past but hadn't embedded it because it kept changing. They had tried one thing, then next year a different thing, and it was unclear how it connected to the last thing because people had been reinventing and coming up with their own new ideas, without embedding them.

"The first big [ITA Group] campaign at Australia Post, Our AP Way, was really about readying the organization for change. It's a 200-year-old organization that was previously run as a subset of public service. It has a lot of people working there who saw it as a job for life with lots of protection, who didn't see the need to change. That's until suddenly they've got to embrace parcels which come with different methodology, processes, machinery, delivery methods and structures.

"How do you get that workforce ready? When COVID-19 happened, we put in really fast regulatory change, and it was resisted by the workforce because they weren't in the headspace for it. That's why it was important to start with Our AP Way, which was about the case for change. So, now we're building on the safety campaign, Be A Friend, and it's much easier to embed because we've readied the workforce for change."



What are some of the challenges of embedding safety culture in a hierarchical organization?

"It's challenging because we're a traditional hierarchical organization, and so you need to bring people with you because they're not used to some of the things you need for safety like challenging and changing rules which might not be working.

"In safety, we want you to speak up. We want you to have a good two-way dialogue where people can speak up on safety, regardless of their position in the company. This doesn't just apply to leaders and team members, but also cultural considerations such as particularly male-dominated parts of the business, or individuals from ethnic backgrounds whose culture is not to challenge authority."

What advice would you give to leaders who may know they have a safety issue or a rules-based environment and want to improve their safety in their organization's culture?

"I think investing in leadership and culture is a key enabler of any change. You can't just do the process-y stuff because you get stuck. Don't ignore important things like process and equipment, but don't only focus on it. You need to look at what's behind getting those things to work effectively. So you need a program that engages the culture.

Check with your workforce what's worked in the past, and what hasn't, and build a long-term plan to change it. Plus, using external consultants can be quite good to give a bit of credibility and fresh eyes. They can help speed up the process because they're not distracted by all the day-to-day stuff that internal people are. Be clever about how you use the right consultants to fast-track and leverage, gain credibility and support the campaign."



In safety, we want you to speak up. We want you to have a good two-way dialogue where people can speak up on safety, regardless of their position in the company.

—ROD MAULE

Making it human

Who do you stay safe for?

Perhaps you stay safe to spend time with family, friends or loved ones. To enjoy your hobbies, to travel or to hang out with your pet. Whatever it is that drives you, it matters. A workplace injury or incident could prevent you from living your life how you want to live it.

This is often where we start with our clients. We encourage leaders to remove metrics, policies and statistics. Then we encourage them to engage their employees to find out what emotionally resonates with them.

What's your why?

People need to feel emotionally connected to the reasons behind workplace culture change. This emotional connection, based on people's motivations and passions, will be different for every company.

That's why great safety campaigns are not off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all. Working closely with your employees, conduct detailed discovery sessions to uncover what drives people inside and outside of work, and build your safety campaign around that.

In our work with our retail supply chain client, we engaged teams across 14 distribution centers undergoing extensive discovery to establish what motivated their teams.

Through this project, we found that people had rich lives, hobbies and passions outside of work, which were big motivators in their lives. So, we designed their safety campaign,

with images of employees engaged in their favorite hobbies and pastimes, emphasizing that you only have one life, so ensure you live it to the fullest potential.

Within six months, the campaign was regarded as the best safety campaign our client had seen, with increased incident reporting and decreased overall incidents. Moreover, because the campaign was relatable, getting to the heart of the emotional motivations behind staying safe, it encouraged open conversations around mental health, improving the psychological safety of staff and well-being at the company.





I'm ok, you're ok

When we partnered with Australia Post, we found that a strong workplace community was a significant motivating factor in their employees' working lives. Their culture of teams working closely together was evident through our discovery work. Teams wanted a motivating and positive campaign.

That's why our campaign, Be a Friend, promoted ownership over not only their own safety, but that of others. The campaign used simple, human and relatable language which everyone could understand, as simple as the campaign's tagline: I'm ok, you're ok.

Build it together

To make safety campaigns human, you must design them in partnership with the people you're trying to engage. Safety campaigns which resonate are built and co-designed by employees, not just handed to them.

When you get to the crux of what motivates, concerns and drives people, you can build a human narrative around safety that moves away from checking boxes to sparking long-term behavioral change.

The power of storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful tool for human connection. It brings ideas to life, makes complex concepts relatable and is deeply rooted in human connection. Science also tells us that storytelling is a powerful tool for understanding new ideas. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner found that stories are 22 times more memorable than facts alone.

As Safety+Health Magazine notes, “compelling stories cause the brain to release oxytocin, which, according to the Harvard Business Review, makes people more likely to look out for others and better attend to their own needs.”

Let leaders set the scene

Organizational leaders must show their commitment to safety by creating a compelling story that illustrates their ongoing dedication.

When we worked with a well-known shipping line company, we knew the campaign needed to be kick-started by leaders inspiring their teams with the story of the need for change. Given the company’s culture, where seafarers took their cues from above, we began with senior leaders discussing what inclusion and respect meant to them and why they were personally committed to change.

Visualizing the issues

Building a story can help us visualize the issue at hand. We worked with Australia Post to enhance storytelling tools, such as using CCTV footage in safety videos, to help learners see the severity of poor safety practices in eye-opening new ways.

Storytelling also helps people understand the broader impact of their behavior. Safety incidents are never isolated. Their impact extends beyond the immediate victim. Through storytelling, you can encourage people to consider the many affected individuals, from those harmed to their friends, family and beyond.



Share stories

Storytelling is not only valuable for setting the scene; it's also a powerful tool for continuous behavior modeling, building connections and fostering open communication across teams.

In our work with our large retail supply chain client based in Australia and New Zealand, they strengthened the iLife campaign by encouraging story sharing on their internal communication channel. This practice promoted feedback and continuous reflection while providing opportunities to

recognize and reward employees for their commitment to modeling good safety behaviors.

As Safety+Health Magazine puts it, "The real magic of storytelling in safety happens when you get workers telling stories to each other. That way, they're exposed to real, credible stories from their peers and supervisors, and are also actively engaged in sharing their own narratives—creating a pervasive sense of connection and identity in the workplace."





A picture tells a thousand words

Creativity might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about workplace safety campaigns. But it should be. People are visual learners inspired by campaigns that integrate emotive narratives with compelling visual content. So, how can you design a campaign that will make an impact?

Draw from discovery

The visuals accompanying your campaign must be suitable for your people specifically, and every company will be different. Throughout our discovery sessions, a theme that often arises is the desire for people to see a sense of community and collective effort in their safety campaigns. It needs to feel real and relatable, not cartoonish or “off the shelf” using stock imagery.

Create emotional connections

Safety is an emotional topic—just ask someone who has experienced a workplace safety incident firsthand. Safeopedia notes that campaigns using powerful, relatable images can create a stronger emotional connection, leading to better retention and reinforcement of safety messages.

Through our discovery work with a global logistics organization, we asked employees, “Who do you stay safe for?” The overwhelming response? Their families.

This insight shaped the visual part of the campaign, where we used children’s drawings to highlight the emotional impact of safety on employees’ families. These drawings were featured in printed materials and brought to life in safety films.



Keep it positive

Campaigns should be inspiring and uplifting. Employees are adults who need to feel optimistic about upcoming changes, not as if they're being scolded for getting it wrong.

In our Australia Post campaign, we discovered a strong sense of community among colleagues, with employees feeling they were working hand in hand with their peers. This insight led to the success of the Be a Friend campaign, which featured simple images of colleagues helping each other stay safe, encapsulated by the message, "I'm okay, you're okay."



Use people-based photography

Research supports the idea that using people-based photography in workplace safety campaigns can significantly enhance their effectiveness by reducing the risk of becoming "white noise" in the workplace.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasizes that personalized communication, through group discussions and two-way communications, tends to have a higher impact and leads to decisions to change behavior, when compared to mass-media campaigns. They also note the importance of emotional and pervasive themes, over rational and informative ones.

Making it real

By now, we hope you're on board with our methodology and understand the importance of building a Behavior-Based Safety culture. You know that to do that, you need to make it a priority and make it human. But how do you make it real?

How do theory, mindset, culture, process and design combine to make a culture shift a reality?

Engage

- > Do they feel safe at work? How have previous campaigns landed?
- > What's stopping them from speaking up?
- > What's the worst that could happen, and what would it mean for them?

Undergo a discovery process that deeply inspires, motivates and moves people. Discovery is designed to make a noticeable impact; to do that, it has to be a safe space for discussion. Brilliant discovery uncovers uncomfortable truths. It gets to the root of the real issues and feelings among staff.

Co-design a campaign with your people. You should understand what motivates your people. Make it positive, inspiring and proactive—they should feel inspired by the change ahead.

Activate

- > What do you want your people to feel, think and do?
- > How will you support your leaders in role modeling good behaviors?

Bring the campaign to life with training and toolkits designed for your people alone. You'll know what this should look like if you've done the 'Engage' part well. The training should engage your people emotionally and with empathy.

The ongoing support you provide, in the form of toolkits or resources, should be simple to use, accessible, practical and straightforward, with relatable everyday reference points to help people perform their roles safely.

Embed

- > What opportunities can we find to place safety at the heart of the regular working day?

At Australia Post, a simple touch included leaders adding "Be Kind. Be Safe" as a sign-off on all emails. Where can you bring safety into the spaces that already exist—internal communication systems, meetings, break rooms and so on?

Then comes the most critical question of all, "How do we know if we're improving?"

Embedding safety is about keeping the energy up. A safety culture is inherently a consistent, continuous and long-term approach, and it's not a quick checkbox. So, you must find ways to bring safety into everyday conversations.

Adopting a Behavior-Based Safety culture doesn't mean discarding the metrics. Track your progress against KPIs and targets to ensure that your safety culture matures over time.

Engage

DO AN EPIC DISCOVERY

Empathy, purpose, impact and context—step into your people’s shoes and discover what safety means to them.

Ask yourself ...

“What are the real issues here?”

“What’s getting in the way?”



CREATE A MEMORABLE CAMPAIGN

Make your people the center of the campaign.

Ask yourself ...

“What’s a proactive, positive message and approach?”



Understanding the real issues gets you to a real and personalized solution.

Activate

MAKE TRAININGS EMOTIONALLY RESONATE

Use training that connects people emotionally and shifts how people think and behave around safety.

Ask yourself ...

“What do you want your people to feel?”

“How do you want your people to think and do?”



ALIGN TOOLKITS TO EVERYDAY JOB NEEDS

Tools people use every day to care for each other and do their jobs safely, with confidence.

Ask yourself ...

“How will you support your people to change their behaviors?”

“How will you support your leaders to role model your behaviors?”



Just doing a creative campaign won’t cut it. It needs to be a holistic solution.

Embed

KEEP TALKING ABOUT IT

Overcome cynicism by bringing safety into conversations that happen anyway—briefings, email sign-offs, business updates, etc. wherever there’s an opportunity, link safety to strategy.

Ask yourself ...

“What are the everyday opportunities where we can keep safety front of mind for everyone?”



KEEP MEASURING IT

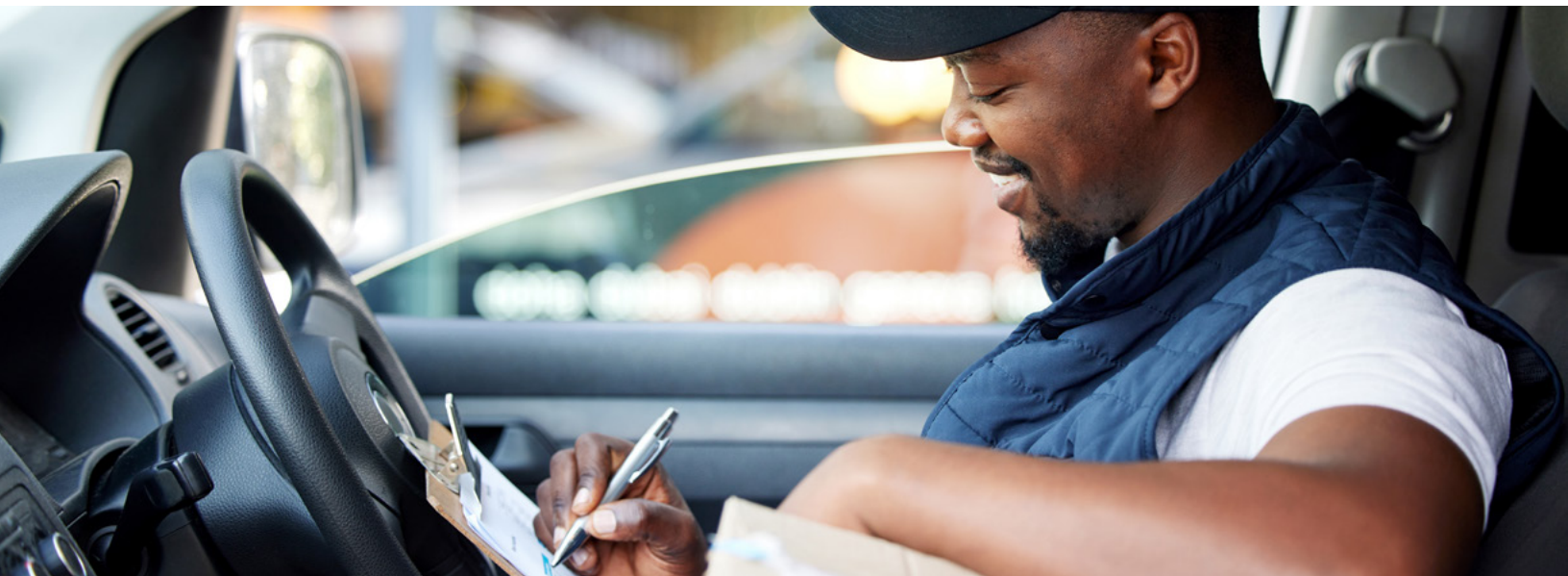
Track the metrics that show your safety culture is maturing.

Ask yourself ...

“How do we know we’re improving?”



Remember, a spike in reporting is a good thing. It means people’s mindsets have shifted, so they can start to change their behaviors.



Starting your journey

We know that you face unprecedented pressures to deliver exceptional standards, care for your people and maintain a focus on improving safety metrics. Developing a holistic, behavior-based culture is not a quick fix, but it's essential for driving real change and reducing safety incidents and accidents in the long term.

All of our clients share a genuine passion for improving safety in their organizations. When we partner with them, it's evident that they have been making significant efforts to enhance their safety practices through various ideas, processes and campaigns. However, these efforts often haven't fully taken hold. The crucial change needed is a cultural shift—one that fundamentally changes behavior and rewards and recognizes that shift.

Get back to the basics

- > Who/what do your people stay safe for?
- > Why should they stay safe at work?
- > What are the consequences if behavior doesn't change?

A strong safety culture will emerge when:

- > It becomes a priority
- > People talk about safety openly with their peers
- > Safety is embedded, recognized and rewarded

When the potential risk is as serious as human life, you can't afford to shy away from long-term change.

If you need support to kick-start your Behavior-Based Safety culture, we'd love to hear from you.

Let's talk—itagroup.com

